"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Rural Church and World Christian Unity*

By Hermann N. Morse** and Mark A. Dawber***

The current movement for World Christian Unity has its roots pretty far back in the life of the church. Such movements are necessarily of slow development. Inevitably, once they become articulate, their proposed ideals run far ahead of the ordinary practise of the church. We all rejoice that during the last two or three years this so-called ecumenical movement has won the interest and devotion of so extensive and diverse a group of individuals and organizations and is now finding some concrete embodiment in the preliminary organization of a World Council of Churches. This very fact, however, makes us all the more aware of the chasm between profession and practise.

In considering the relation of the rural church to this movement we are simply asking ourselves whether the religious life of rural people is so organized and promoted as to advance or retard the ideals of ecumenism. The subject seems important because of its relation to what appear to be serious weaknesses in the ecumenical movement itself. Perhaps these weaknesses are, in some subtle way, connected with the use of such words as "ecumenical" and "ecumenism." Paul Douglass suggests they have come into general use "because the Greeks understood them." When we contemplate the universal it seems remote from our every day interest and it is easy to escape its immediate practical implications. It might be that if we were simply to speak of a world movement for Christian unity we would not so easily escape its implications for the at-home life of the church.

There seems to be a slight tendency for some of the titular leaders of the ecumenical movement to concentrate on the theoretical basis of unity and to neglect the experience and practise of unity. To the innocent bystander it is amazing how many technical and theoretical problems there are, about which the rank and file of the church know nothing and perhaps care less, which must be settled before we can get on with the real business of unity. No one questions that the effort to solve such problems should be made. What one questions is whether the achievement of practical unity might not do more to solve such problems than the solution

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of the problems will do to assist in the achievement of unity. There also appear to be at least traces of a tendency on the part of some leaders of the ecumenical movement to assume that such a movement can succeed with ecumenism as its periphery and unreconstructed sectarianism at its center. It seems easy to forget that the place in which we happen to live and work is a part of the world and that no movement can be genuinely ecumenical unless it operates there.

It is possible that our ecumenical zeal will lead us into certain quite untenable assumptions. One of these is that a World Council of Churches and the other paraphernalia of international cooperation among the churches will of themselves create effective church unity. That has not been our experience on a national, state, city, or county basis. There is little that any council of churches can do to create unity beyond providing a means of effective expression for whatever spirit of unity actually exists. Unity does not grow from outside inward but from inside outward. Those organizations that enable us to express whatever measure of unity is in us, thereby strengthen that unity. But they do not create it. Sometimes by emphasizing cooperation in externals and incidentals they actually seem to confirm us in our inner separateness. It does very little good to enable the churches to speak with one voice unless they can first achieve a common mind. They will say nothing significant in the cause of Christian unity.

Another quite untenable assumption is that we can achieve a common mind by affirmation or by resolution. No church leader should be permitted publicly to advocate ecumenical Christianity unless he is already, in his own domain of influence and responsibility, demonstrating and practicing the largest possible measure of cooperation and unity. It is an unfortunate fact that the effort to promote comity and cooperation in the rural church field has had, on occasions, something less than encouragement from widely publicized advocates of world-wide Christian unity.

Somewhat similar in its effect is the assumption that world unity can grow in an atmosphere of self-centered parochialism. World unity will have little reality until the mass of Christians begin to be world-minded. In most of our churches we are still in the grip of ancient prejudices and misunderstandings--section against section, city versus country, country versus city, race against race. Ecumenism must include not only spatial concepts but all differences in mind and spirit as well. Here it is that the Christian Rural Fellowship should have great significance. Across not only the distances that separate country from country but the greater distances that can separate mind from mind it may help to achieve a common spirit and a common purpose.

In this whole problem the rural church may well have a critical part. A goodly proportion of the Protestant Christians in the world are now in or have come out of the rural church. The experience of the rural church is still in much of the world the dominant pattern of religious experience. At the same time, it is here that we find our most stubborn expression, with leaders and laity alike, of the most patent and undisguised competitive denominationalism. Also, we must confess that the rural community is the "home grounds" of parochialism. Our success or failure in achieving unity and in developing a sense of world-wide fellowship in the rural church and among rural Christians will have a critical bearing upon the future of the Christian Unity Movement as a whole. This much is said

by way of introduction to the practical discussion in which Dr. Dawber and Dr. Rich will lead us as to the ways in which we can make progress in this matter.

-- Hermann N. Morse

WHAT PROGRESS IS BEING MADE IN RURAL CHURCH UNITY?

The above statement by Dr. Morse and the paper* by Dr. Rich have given us ample background against which to review and measure the practical results in rural church unity. It remains only for me to assemble information on the several achievements and experiences of recent years and to try to interpret them in the light of the varied and difficult conditions in rural life and the rural church that make progress in church unity so slow and disappointing.

First, a word about the progress on a national and state level. Here we are able to report a very real advance. Several of the national mission boards in the Home Missions Council joined in an agreement not to use mission aid in the support of their churches in competition with each other in the local community. This program of comity and cooperation was known as the "Master List" Agreement. It got its name from the fact that "Master Lists" were prepared by states, setting forth the aided churches within each state, also the self-supporting churches in the same communities. This program was applied to communities under 1500 population. Some twenty-eight states have been visited and a careful study made; conferences have been held with the denominational representatives for the purpose of a detailed discussion of the specific cases, to arrive at agreements as to actual competition, and also to devise ways and means by which adjustments could be made. These adjustments have taken several forms: federation, a community church under denominational supervision and service, or an assignment of the field to some one of the denominations. Results to date are reflected in the following facts. Some three hundred situations have been adjusted, involving a saving of about $50,000 of national mission aid and about $17,000 of mission aid from state denominational groups.

These home mission boards have done exceedingly well, when all the obstacles that confront them are considered. They have gone far beyond their denominations in general in their conviction and effort to achieve a measure of Christian unity in the rural church. In fact, it should be stated in their defense that the major obstacle to the program of these mission boards is the opposition or unwillingness to cooperate upon the part of some of the ecclesiastical authorities of the denominations.

Progress is also being made by the several state councils of churches through the activities of the comity committees. Denominations and local churches are gradually being educated in the principles and program of Christian unity in general and this in turn finds its expression in practical adjustments in the local communities. These take the form already outlined: federation, union, or an assignment of the community to some one of the denominations, usually with the requirement that the denomination recognize a broad community basis for membership in the church, so that the largest possible representation of the several denominations may participate in the community church program.

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* - "Effective Techniques in Developing Unity and Cooperation Among Rural Churches" - Published as Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, Number 49.

Now, a word about the general progress in the local churches of rural communities. Studies being made at present, covering the status of the many and varied forms of local church unity, suggest remarkable progress. These studies reveal approximately two thousand rural communities that have worked out some form of church unity. Most of the unions take the form of a community church. Some of these are absolutely independent of the denominations; others are under the leadership of some denomination with local autonomy and the broadest recognition of the several denominational memberships in the activities.

The next most popular form of church unity finds its expression in the federated church. In the study made by Professor Ralph A. Felton, "Local Church Cooperation in Rural Communities," rather specific attention was given to some ninety federated churches. This study would suggest that, in view of all the obstacles that have confronted the movement for church unity, these federations have made good progress. In appraising these federations the following factors must be kept in mind: (1) Local churches seldom are encouraged to federate until they have been so depleted and exhausted by competition that there is little or no life left. (2) As a rule they have been given little or no encouragement or counsel by the denominational superintendents after they have federated. (3) Denominations have not been very friendly to their pastors who have been willing to serve federated churches. (4) Lack of a unified missionary program and budget has also detracted from the larger success of the federated church. But in spite of all these problems federated churches are increasing in number and development.

No statement of progress in church unity in the rural community would be complete without a word about the Larger Parish. The Larger Parish movement has been retarded during the depression years, but there are signs of a new impetus in the movement. In the opinion of rural church leaders, the Larger Parish plan is the best single method to overcome the problem of competition. Those that have been organized over a period of five to ten years have proved the value of this method in overcoming the weaknesses of the competing small churches, and that success is possible where these small, separate churches are united in a common program of parish work on an interdenominational basis. There is a steady increase in the number of Larger Parishes in rural areas during the past three years. We predict a trend toward Larger Parish development in the coming decade.

In closing, a brief observation is in order concerning next steps in church unity in rural areas. We are now at the cross-roads in the programs of comity and cooperation. We have gone about as far as we can go in the way of negative comity. By that we mean that so much of our endeavor has been directed toward getting out of each other's way. That is well and good--to remove the obstacles of competition is necessary--but the time has now arrived in which we must engage in more positive forms of church unity. We must discover and devise more ways to do things together. We must work definitely for a United Church of Christ in the countryside. To talk glibly of ecumenicity in idealistic, abstract terms and not to raise one's voice to achieve the practical consummation of this ideal is a species of hypocrisy that will ultimately defeat the church.

Christian unity is making progress in the rural church. Let all those who believe in the Kingdom of God on earth lend a hand to make possible its coming more speedily by working for greater Christian unity.

-- Mark A. Dawber